



## REVISITING AQUINAS' NATURAL LAW IN POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY OF THOUGHT

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### ABSTRACT

This study described the postmodern interpretation of Values and Norms in the new generation. The researchers aimed to defend against their interpretation because of values and norms are important factors in man's life. To do this paper, the researchers employed the intellectual inquiry on the concept of St. Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law which is the foundation of his discussion on ethics. While this study served to advance the idea about the contemporary relevance of an ethics of virtue by way of its significantly more detailed explication of morality, the researchers concluded that in order to become a morally upright human person, there's a need to give a clear emphasis the idea of defense of values and norms which is so significant in studying St. Thomas Aquinas's divine law.

**Keywords:** *St. Thomas Aquinas; natural law; ambivalence theory; postmodernism; values and norms*

### 1. Introduction

Post-modernity must work toward respect, discipline, and responsibility because these are what shape the life of human beings. However, the genuine values and norms that society once upheld have now produced a scarcity of moral perspectives, and this situation cannot be denied, as values and norms serve as tools for fostering harmonious relationships among individuals (Hampshire, 2023). It is believed that life becomes meaningful through ethical perspectives, as these guide human actions according to their natural inclinations. The purity of an individual's heart is often corrupted by actions that are inconsistent with accepted values and norms.

A human being, however, is not merely defined by such deviations, for the ultimate goal of every person is to do good and avoid evil—this being the core theme of St. Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law of ethics, which emphasizes the holistic nature of man. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, Natural Law is guided by reason, which serves as the source of moral law (Asla & Paladino, 2024). It directs human beings toward what is good, as the good is the ultimate goal of every person's action and is desirable within human nature.

But how can one know if a person is acting rightly or wrongly? For Aquinas, an act is morally right if it conforms to the moral law. Moral action, therefore, is determined by reason, for reason itself is the source of the moral law (Lind, 2023). Aquinas further explained that the moral law originates from God's eternal law; thus, divine law is a reflection of this eternal truth. In connection with the definition of Natural Law, moral action requires abstaining from evil and pursuing what is good.



Furthermore, this paper seeks to present the postmodern interpretation of values and norms in the new generation. The researchers aimed to challenge such interpretations, asserting that values and norms remain essential factors in human life. To accomplish this, the researchers will use St. Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law as the foundation of the discussion on ethics.

But what is Natural Law? To answer this, it is necessary to revisit the philosophy of Aristotle, particularly his *Nicomachean Ethics*, since St. Thomas Aquinas was deeply influenced by Aristotelian thought. For Aristotle, ethics is an inquiry into the true good and how to realize it. He focused on bringing about good in human actions, for every good has the nature of an end, a final cause, or a purpose. Whenever a human being acts, he acts toward a perceived good; thus, all human activities aim at an end considered good.

The highest good is that which is an end in itself. To ask what the highest good for human beings is, therefore, is to ask about the goal or ultimate purpose of human life. According to Aristotle, this highest good is happiness (Otteson, 2024). Happiness is the end that all humans strive for—it is the final and self-sufficient goal sought for its own sake. Aristotle defines happiness as the activity of the rational soul in accordance with virtue (Symons & VanderWeele, 2024). This idea is central to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where all human activities should align with *Eudaimonia*, or true happiness. From this philosophical view emerged St. Thomas Aquinas's ethical framework, which continues to illuminate the reflections of many thinkers who adopt the principles of Natural Law.

It was through Aristotle that an ethical view of divine nature began and later developed in St. Thomas Aquinas's theory, which interprets ethics as a means to understand divine law (Reising, 2024). For Aquinas, doing good is the highest form of divine nature because it allows individuals to discern the true purpose of human existence. While Aristotle viewed the truly happy man as the philosopher rather than the saint, St. Thomas Aquinas adopted both a deontological and teleological standpoint. His theory of the end of human conduct is, in some respects, intellectualist; however, his shift in emphasis marks a significant difference between his ethical theory and that of Aristotle.

According to Aquinas, only the free acts of human beings—those performed through rational choice—properly belong to the moral sphere (Ferdynus, 2024). Every human act, though directed toward some good, cannot fully satisfy the human will, which ultimately seeks the universal good. This satisfaction can only be attained through the pursuit of moral law. Aquinas argued that human beings can attain moral law only if guided by reason, for an action is good when performed in accordance with conscience.

St. Thomas Aquinas understood conscience as the inner voice of reason within the intellect, calling the human person to follow the moral law—to do good and avoid evil. Conscience serves as the guide in making moral decisions and in understanding human existence (Grace et al., 2024). Therefore, divine law can be fully grasped only when a person is guided by conscience. Human activities must be governed by conscience to produce sound reasoning and to fulfill the true moral purpose of life.



## **2. Theoretical basis**

This study is grounded in St. Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law Theory, which asserts that moral principles are derived from human reason and are rooted in the divine order established by God. According to Aquinas, every person possesses the natural inclination to do good and avoid evil, and this rational tendency reflects participation in the Eternal Law—the divine wisdom that governs all creation (Crouch, 2024). Natural law, therefore, serves as the moral foundation that guides human actions toward their ultimate end, which is happiness and union with the divine good.

The study also draws from Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, which influenced Aquinas's moral philosophy. Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia or human flourishing—attained through virtuous action—provides the basis for Aquinas's understanding that virtue and reason are essential in living a moral life (Ardelt & Kingsbury, 2024). By combining Aristotelian ethics with Christian theology, Aquinas established a framework where moral behavior is both rational and divinely ordained.

In the context of postmodern thought, this theoretical foundation challenges the relativistic interpretation of values and norms. While postmodernism often rejects universal moral truths, Aquinas's Natural Law emphasizes the existence of objective moral standards accessible through human reason (Boulter, 2024). Hence, this study defends the enduring relevance of Natural Law as an ethical framework for reaffirming values and norms in the contemporary era, particularly in guiding individuals toward moral responsibility and authentic human existence.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This study is purely library-based and uses a qualitative philosophical approach. The researchers relied entirely on secondary sources such as books, scholarly journals, and published articles related to St. Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, and postmodern philosophy. Through careful reading, analysis, and interpretation of these materials, the researchers examined how Aquinas's ideas on divine and natural law can address the moral issues raised by postmodern thought. No fieldwork or empirical data collection was conducted, as the study focused solely on theoretical and conceptual analysis.

## **4. Result and discussion**

### ***4.1. Norms and Values as the goal of Divine Law***

The ethical life acknowledges the importance of choice in every individual because it is through choice that a person accepts moral duty and becomes a responsible moral actor. At this stage, one takes responsibility and fulfills moral obligations, distancing oneself from self-interest and becoming aware of responsibilities, duties, and moral rules. This process allows the individual to actively establish a true sense of identity.

Accordingly, this marks the beginning of a person's journey toward authentic existence, as one becomes aware of personal actions through the values and norms that shape life. An individual becomes conscious of existence upon realizing the emptiness of mere pleasure and recognizing the need to abandon it in favor of a life grounded in moral values and guiding norms (Fry & Vu, 2024).



These values and norms serve as a compass that leads one toward genuine and meaningful existence.

However, the ethical person stands apart from the crowd because, through values and norms, such a person becomes self-aware and lives according to a sense of duty. This sense of obligation makes the individual accountable for existence. Values and norms provide an ethical framework centered on adherence to duty, but they must also include sincere passion and a genuine desire to help others (Yang et al., 2023). Without such passion and commitment, one merely follows the law's letter while neglecting its true spirit.

Furthermore, the researchers affirm that the values and norms of life are defined by obedience to what is universal and absolute, leading the individual to transform and live according to a higher moral existence. Thus, values and norms are rooted in divine law. Once an individual fully embraces these moral principles, authentic personhood is achieved, as one recognizes that human existence aligns with divine order and that human will represent only the physical expression of life within the world (Molefe, 2023).

#### ***4.2 Post-modernism as a falsification theory of norms and values***

The significance of human behavior in the present time has been widely influenced by the rise of post-modernism, a movement that has deeply shaped the thinking of the new generation and spread throughout the world. Unlike the older generations, modern millennials appear to have drifted away from the natural foundation of human life, which is traditionally guided by values and norms. The defense of these values and norms against the influence of post-modernism is essential, for such ethical principles serve as the moral link that reconnects individuals to their authentic humanity (Miller, 2024).

This reconnection involves a process of inner growth, transformation, and renewal of both mind and spirit. However, many individuals today stand at the threshold of modern immanentism and subjectivism, where personal consciousness is elevated above objective moral truth. This attitude leads to excessive self-centeredness, distancing individuals from moral responsibility and ethical order.

The challenge, therefore, lies in helping people rediscover and restore the role of values and norms within society. Individuals must be prepared to recognize that post-modernism often leads to an inauthentic form of existence. In this regard, St. Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law serves as a vital guide for the new generation, offering a moral framework for interpreting and applying values and norms in a modern context (Levering, 2025).

A fundamental principle must be remembered: the capacity to act comes with the responsibility to act rightly. In the postmodern era, it is essential that individuals, especially the youth, develop both the power to choose and the wisdom to direct those choices toward the good. This requires a dynamic relationship between those in authority and the younger generation, wherein the former provide guidance and the latter entrust themselves to moral formation.

True transformation begins when an individual willingly embraces and follows the moral values



and norms of society (Vrana & Singh, 2023). Through this obedience, guided by conscience and divine law, a person achieves fulfillment and becomes capable of living an authentic and meaningful existence.

#### ***4.3 Aquinas' Natural Law defends universal morals against postmodern moral relativism***

Values and norms can be understood through ethical reflection and moral reasoning (Bleher & Braun, 2023). These are inherent in human existence; morality is present from birth and serves as a guiding light for one's personal life. However, many individuals influenced by postmodern thought tend to dismiss or even reject the essence and significance of ethics. For them, moral truth is relative, and universal standards are questioned. Yet, genuine morality goes beyond merely performing what is right—it involves the development of virtuous character. A morally upright person is not only one who acts rightly but one who possesses the habitual disposition to choose and love what is right (Durkheim, 2023). A person of virtue finds joy in virtuous actions and feels aversion toward immoral deeds.

In defense of ethical action within the postmodern era, it is important to affirm that St. Thomas Aquinas was correct in his principle that one must “do good and avoid evil,” a maxim that aligns with divine law. This divine law originates from the Pure Act—the Creator—who is the source of all that exists and whose guidance is rooted in reason. Aquinas' moral theory is founded on rationality, for no action can be truly perfect if it is not guided by reason (Silva, 2023). Divine law reveals how human beings are meant to act according to reason, which exists inherently within human nature. It is reason that moves individuals to pursue good and reject evil, directing moral action in accordance with the divine order (Johnston, 2023). Through this divine guidance, humans participate in God's eternal wisdom, aligning their actions with the ultimate purpose of moral and spiritual fulfillment.

Therefore, the postmodern interpretation of values and norms, which often promotes moral relativism, is a falsification of authentic moral understanding. Such an approach distances humanity from its ethical foundation. People must once again reconnect with divine law to regain awareness of true values and norms. This reconnection requires openness and acceptance of moral truth. To live genuinely as a person means to embody goodness, to share it with others, and to allow the spirit of moral virtue to shape one's actions. In doing so, individuals can rediscover the real meaning of ethics and moral life.

### **5. Conclusion**

To end this paper, the researchers would like to emphasize that defending values and norms plays a vital role in the study of St. Thomas Aquinas's concept of divine law. This paper has shown that the postmodern period carries with it a distortion of thoughts and ideas concerning ethics and morality. In order to restore the genuine relationship between humanity and God, the researchers turned to Aquinas's divine law to demonstrate that false notions of ethics must be corrected, for the ongoing struggle against moral confusion must come to an end.

Developing moral character among individuals requires consistent ethical action, as true reconnection with moral truth does not happen instantly. Transformation takes time and reflection for human life to be shaped by moral purpose. Through this gradual process, every person may





achieve authentic humanity—one defined by the essential quality of morality.

To attain this genuine moral understanding, one must follow and associate closely with the divine law, which serves as a guide toward living a virtuous and meaningful life. When guided by reason and divine wisdom, human beings can rediscover a unique way of ethical living. Through this path, postmodern perspectives—often detached from moral truth—may be renewed, provided that individuals are willing to embrace the moral and ethical principles embodied in values and norms.

Thus, the defense of values and norms remains both necessary and possible in the present time. Divine law continues to guide individuals in realizing the true essence of morality, shaping their character, attitude, and will toward the fullness of a genuinely ethical life.

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